

Freeway study group seeks open process

By Doug Murphy

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The South Mountain Citizens Advisory Team met again last week and continued to hammer out a process by which it will study and eventually reach a recommendation on the South Mountain Loop 202 Freeway while at the same time making the process as open to the public as possible.

But a battle over the Arizona Department of Transportation's suggestion that team members keep agendas and information confidential until after a meeting takes place nearly sidetracked the process.

"We want to have frank discussions with the team, but we also don't want to fight headlines," said Tim Tait a spokesman for ADOT. "We don't want you surprised by headlines."

But members of the team, who all represent various organizations and groups, argued that they need to share information with others before a meeting.

"I need to go talk to my village," said Laurel Arndt, a member of the team and the Ahwatukee Foothills Village Planning Committee.

In the end it was agreed that team members would not share information before a meeting with the media, but the decision raised doubts for at least one team member.

"One of the problems with this group has been the process, with keeping information from the public," said Sandy Bahr, who represents the Sierra Club.

The volunteer team members did agree that all meetings will be open to the public to meet the spirit of Arizona's open meeting law, although it is not required of the advisory group.

"It allows for a more friendly atmosphere and it makes it clear we're doing the public's business," Bahr said.

She also insisted that the community be allowed to ask questions, a suggestion supported by John Rodriguez who represents the Lakewood Homeowners Association in Ahwatukee Foothills.

"I think we have to have a half hour for the public," at the end of each meeting, Rodriguez said, even if there is no clear answer for the questions they ask.

There was also a general feeling that the team should be expanded to include representatives from new homeowners associations that formed after the team did in 2002 and to include some Chandler representation along with possible medical experts, like a representative from the Arizona Asthma Association.

But because there wasn't a solid consensus on which groups to invite, it was tabled until the May 24 meeting when team members were asked to bring specific new member suggestions.

Then team was formed to help advise ADOT on revisions to the 1985 South Mountain Loop 202 plan of a six-lane freeway from Interstate 10 in Ahwatukee Foothills around Pecos Road west through South Mountain Park, turning north and reconnecting with I-10 around 55th Avenue.

Voters approved the plan in 1988 but the freeway went unfunded. During the years, ADOT bought some of the freeway right of way but allowed homes to be built in other sections in Ahwatukee Foothills.

In 2004 voters in Maricopa County approved the extension of a special sales tax to fund transportation improvements, including the Loop 202, but without specifying a route.

Since 2002 the team has been working with ADOT to update the plan to take into account growth and transportation needs. Last year the team suggested that the freeway should connect with I-10 at 100th Avenue and the Loop 101 instead of 55th Avenue. But ADOT director Victor Mendez rejected that idea, instead selecting the old 1985 route in the west.

ADOT hopes to finish studying the eastern route, which right now is slated to be 10 lanes wide and follows Pecos Road. At a minimum it will require the demolition of 255 homes partly because some had been built in the right of way but also because the freeway is now wider than originally planned.

Efforts to persuade the Gila River Indian Community to consider the freeway south of Pecos on tribal land have been rebuffed with a formal tribal council resolution opposing a freeway on Indian land.

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